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Vermont Becomes the First State to Offer Free Breakfast and Lunch to All Low-Income Students

BARRE – As the school year gets underway, Gov. Peter Shumlin and Education Secretary Armando Vilaseca today visited Barre Town Elementary School to herald a new law making Vermont the first state in the nation to provide school meals --breakfast and lunch -- at no charge for all students qualifying for the federal reduced-price meals program.

"We all know that hungry children can't learn," said Gov. Shumlin, who was joined by advocates committed to the battle against childhood hunger. "I am very proud that Vermont is the first state to ensure that all children have access to good food, so that they can focus on their education without worrying whether they will be hungry."

Previously, children whose families earned over 130% percent of the federal poverty level (roughly \$30,620 for a family of four) were ineligible for free schools meals. The new law means that 37,000 children are now able to have breakfast and lunch at no charge during the school day.

"With the Governor's support, the Agency of Education and food advocates worked together to ensure that all students have the resources they need," said Secretary Vilaseca. "This is a huge step in the right direction. Providing nutritious meals to all low income students for free will help foster a better educational environment for all students."

School meals are the main source of nutrition for many children. The USDA provides various levels of federal reimbursement for meals served to all students. Vermont's schools are in a unique position to ensure that all low-income students have access to healthy school meals at no charge with the new legislation, which was passed by the 2012 Legislature and signed into law by Gov. Shumlin.

"This supports not only our students, but our school food service programs as well," said Laurie Colgan, VT-AOE Child Nutrition Program Director. "I hear from many schools that many low income students would have trouble scraping together the charge for a reduced-price meal, adding stress for those students and a lot of administrative time for schools trying to track bills for school meals. This support from our Governor and the Legislature indicates a strong commitment to the future of Vermont's students and the schools they attend."

In 2008, Vermont made history by making breakfast free for all students who qualify for the reduced-price program. Hunger Free Vermont is an active voice in the on-going conversations about food insecurity. They assist schools with establishing school breakfast and lunch programs while also working to improve food quality and expand access to this reliable source of nutrition for school age children. The group, noting that September is Hunger Action Month, praised Vermont's leadership on school nutrition.

“We are thrilled that Governor Shumlin and the Vermont Legislature supported this school meal expansion to ensure that all children in Vermont schools have proper nutrition on a daily basis,” said Marissa Parisi, Executive Director of Hunger Free Vermont. “We believe this will positively impact children’s health as well as their ability to learn and focus in the classroom without the worry of whether or not they will be able to eat lunch.”

Improvements in children’s health and education have helped Vermont maintain its No. 3 ranking by the annual Kids Count report in education, family and community, as well as No. 4 in overall children’s health. However, as it is elsewhere in the nation, poverty continues to be a problem in Vermont, and the percentage of children who rely on summer meal assistance has been increasing in Vermont.

“Improvement of educational opportunities when faced with societal issues like poverty requires systemic approaches,” said Sec. Vilaseca. “These are not easy problems to address, but the Agency of Education, in partnership with education stakeholders, has been able to make a difference through increased use of our full service approaches for delivering essential needs for Vermont’s youth.”

“While we rank high nationally in many areas, we always strive to do better,” said John Fischer, Deputy Commissioner of Education. “It’s about continuous improvement. We want to graduate all students from high school and with better career readiness every year.”

School officials across the state endorsed the change.

“The elimination of the reduced price for students will benefit families, students, and teachers,” said Steve Marinelli, Milton Town School District Food Service Director. “No longer will families have to struggle to pay for lunch and teachers will not have to worry about the nutritional needs of these students.”

“This bill finally removes a barrier between low income students and food access that has been in place throughout the country for over 50 years,” said Doug Davis, Burlington School District Food Service Director. “By becoming the first state in the nation to eliminate the reduced priced meal category, Vermont has once again proven itself to be leader in the fight to end childhood hunger.”

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